

The Field Speaks on Literacy Research

by **Fiona Murray**

In the fall of 2002, the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) sought input from the literacy field on a National Literacy Action Agenda to guide our development as a field in the years to come. MCL received feedback almost unanimously endorsing the five priority vision statements. Over 240 literacy workers, learners, researchers, tutors, and administrators from every province and territory responded to this survey. Given the launch of *Literacies*, the survey responses and comments that relate to research are especially worth reflecting on.

The National Literacy Action Agenda discussion workbook proposed several objectives and principles and highlighted 5 inter-related priority areas from which to build action steps. Priority Four on Developing Knowledge asked respondents:

- 1) Do you support this vision for Literacy Research?
A range of research on adult literacy contributes to our understanding of literacy challenges, needs and solutions. Research findings are clear, accessible and linked to the realities of practice.
- 2) Do you agree with the proposed Research goals?
 - a) ensure that existing Canadian and international literacy research is catalogued and easily accessible
 - b) identify changing research priorities on a regular basis, in consultation with the literacy community and other key stakeholders
 - c) ensure that adult literacy receives increased attention and support from research bodies and funders
 - d) support a range of literacy research, including learner-based, program-based, and "action" research as well as academic research
 - e) develop the research capacity within the literacy community
 - f) develop ways and means of effectively communicating literacy research findings
- 3) Depending on your/your group's interests and expertise, can you suggest what could be done, and by whom, to advance any of these Research goals?

For more information on the results of MCL's Action Agenda survey, go to www.literacy.ca.

"Less dollars in research, more into delivery. Research should not supercede action."

"We will have to have strong programs in order to do the research. Programs first, then research!"

Ninety-seven per cent of respondents agreed with the proposed vision for "developing knowledge", but the range of views was striking. In general respondents agreed that the proposed vision was a good ideal for the future but that direct program funding should be the priority now. Research should be considered a small segment in the literacy pie and must be properly coordinated within a well-funded national literacy strategy.

"How much research do we need to prove that literacy is important?"

"Literacy has been researched to death. Time now for action."

Many respondents viewed research as the opposite of action. Frequently, they referred to research as a passive or arbitrary activity because the results do not seem directly and immediately applicable. They were also sceptical because too many worthy projects have been funded only to produce reports that gather dust on shelves. They expressed considerable fear that research funding will come at the expense of literacy programs and that this research will do little to improve literacy delivery.

"We need to build expertise and an appetite for rigour in the field now."

Many respondents felt that enough good research is already 'out there', but the information and findings are not broadly disseminated. The findings need to go from simply being available to being truly accessible. Learning and reflecting on current research information needs to be considered an important part of the literacy worker's job. People are frustrated that efforts get duplicated because findings are not distributed widely enough.

“Let’s not forget that we do not have a large base of literacy researchers. We need to nurture the capacity for inquiry within our own field.”

Many respondents affirmed that most research to date has been valuable and appreciated. But they repeatedly highlighted the need to develop and enhance our communication networks and opportunities to share research information. People recognized the valuable role that NALD and MCL play now and could play in the future. They also suggested that research capacity might be best strengthened at the provincial level through the coalitions and networks. In fact, many found it difficult to comment on a national vision for literacy research since there are such different literacy infrastructures in each province and territory.

“Developing a positive attitude towards research is tied to standards for stakeholders.”

The question of who sets the research agenda recurred through most of the comments. Practitioners and learners alike felt removed from the research stream, often referred to as ‘academia.’ The responses indicated that research is primarily done by universities, governments and “high-priced” consultants. Clearly there was a sense of mistrust that such researchers are not truly connected with ever-changing literacy realities at the grassroots. Some researchers who responded indicated that we need to get beyond the frustrating “us-and-them” attitude gap. Practitioners felt that they would do more research and be able to critically reflect on research if they were treated as qualified and legitimate professionals (e.g. with fair wages, professional development funds and release time for training). The need for time to absorb new research findings was mentioned more often than the need for funding.

“Much of the research has looked at ‘how many’. It would be useful for practitioners to have more ‘how to’ and ‘what works’.”

The content of the research was also a sensitive issue. Practitioners and learners want to be included

in setting the research agenda yet feel ill-equipped to carry it out. While some said that research should be linked to practical and current issues and questions, others pointed out that this can lead to unfocused efforts that follow the funding “flavour” or delivery “crisis” of the month. A few people said that if we focus too much on answering practice issues and questions, we may be curbing fresh and original ideas and knowledge. Some theoretical research will always be valuable. There needs to be a balance between responding to rapidly changing needs and developing a solid base of information in order to “make the case” and “set good directions” in literacy approaches.

Developing a research strategy

Ultimately, the survey offered no single shared understanding of what research really is. It obviously means many things to many people. Overall there was a strong plea for gathering best practices and compiling what we know in order to figure out what works. There is also clearly a place for research grounded in practice, which needs to be encouraged and developed with our field.

The survey responses clearly indicated that all stakeholders must be involved in developing a national literacy research strategy within a broader National Literacy Action Agenda. The comments reinforced some of the other proposed priorities such as partnership development, support for a quality delivery system, developing the literacy field as a profession, and policy development.

As we lobby governments, our field is in a unique position to model lifelong learning and inquiry. The survey responses and comments on literacy research were not so much a debate as an eagerness to clarify what literacy research is, what it could be, who could do it and how it could be done. New developments like this journal are certainly a welcome forum to explore these important issues. ■



Fiona Murray has worked in community-based literacy for over 10 years and is currently the Communications/Liaison Officer with the Movement for Canadian Literacy. She can be reached at the MCL office in Ottawa, 613-563-2464 or fiona@literacy.ca.